

# Habits for Professional Self-Care

Everyone is so tired, stressed, and frustrated. Most educational professionals not afraid of hard work, but this year is different...so different. Nearly half of all teachers report that a high level of daily stress is a real problem, feeding a burnout crisis that requires immediate action. It is so important that schools and individual professionals don't wait for anyone else to take the necessary action—curing burnout starts within, by normalising professional self-care.

"We need to do a better job of putting ourselves at the top our own 'to do' lists." (Michelle Obama). These words may sound counterintuitive to people who spend their lives serving others. But we can't serve our pupils well if our own energy is being critically drained by stress and fatigue. Here are a few strategies that teachers and teaching assistants can start using right away that will lead to better self-care.

## **Focus on your influence - Urgent and important**

The job of an educator is more complex than ever before. When you are busy—which is pretty much all the time—it's easy to think that everything matters equally. The problem with this approach is that there is simply not enough time in the day to do everything. Therefore, it is critical that you decide what matters most and spend the majority of your time doing that. The list of obligations and responsibilities assigned to you might be out of your control, but where you decide to focus is not. Focus on those things that are urgent, important and within your influence.

Start by making a list of your top 10 priorities. Next, rank them in order of importance. Finally, circle your top three and cross out the bottom seven. What you circled is what you will focus on. Extremists say that you should ignore anything that is not in your top three. That is probably impossible, but you can give 95 percent of your focus to the top three and leave the remaining 5 percent of your energy to check in on the other seven items. Make this a mini-habit, perhaps on a Sunday evening, for 5 minutes, and you will get more accomplished, have more time for yourself, and worry less about getting everything done.

## **Allow Yourself to notice**

Do you take time to stop and notice what's around you? Just a few minutes to stop, completely, and listen to the sounds that surround you, to look up and appreciate what's above you and to take a few minutes to simply stop and relax your brain. It really doesn't take much to practice a little mindfulness and for these little acts of self-kindness to become habits. As you go about your day, look for times when you can stop and relax your brain, even if it's only for a few minutes. I promise it will be a good use of your time. And, if you don't make the habit of pausing once in a while, your body and mind might just do it on their own—whether you choose to or not.

## **Embrace Vulnerability**

Vulnerability is one of those things that sounds easier than it actually is. It can be particularly difficult for stressed teachers, already with their guards up against physical and emotional harm, to be vulnerable. Yet, embracing vulnerability may be just the thing to help teachers feel better. As Brene' Brown wrote in *The Gifts of Imperfection*, "We have to own our story and share it with someone who has earned the right to hear it, someone whom we can count on to respond with compassion" (p. 9).

Create time to journal about how you are feeling and then share these stories with your colleagues. Create a safe place to connect and engage in story-telling. These stories are powerful, brave, and reaffirming. Yes, listeners learn from hearing others' mistakes. More than anything though, they learn that they are not alone—and they give themselves a little grace.

### **Reach Out**

One of the biggest lessons I learnt, as a Head Teacher, was that I wasn't invincible, despite my youthful arrogance and self-belief. I actually didn't have all the answers. It took a major event...a mental breakdown...for me to recognise this fact. As the Head Teacher, I was the one with ultimate responsibility and, therefore, should have been able to handle whatever came my way. But there were days when I didn't know what to do and—at the same time—didn't feel as though I could reveal this to others. I should have realised that I actually had two choices: pretend and fail or ask for help. Unfortunately, I chose to ask for help after the crisis. However, I am proud to say that, as an educational consultant, I still seek this help right now, on a regular basis, from a group of trusted colleagues who empathise and support each other. Why not ask for help? Wouldn't you want my colleagues to do the same if you could help them in some way? Once I normalised help-seeking, I was less stressed and recouped the time I would have spent fumbling in search of a solution.

### **Pass Your Umbrella**

Whilst these strategies might help you reduce stress and take better care of yourself, there is no doubt that there will be days when you feel as if you just can't go any further. As teachers, you hold the umbrella day in and day out, protecting your pupils from everything that could possibly harm them. You are their shield. The problem is, there comes a time when our arms get tired and our hands begin to shake. Continuing to hold the umbrella is almost impossible and can send us over the edge, physically and mentally. Remember that it is okay to pass your umbrella so that you can rest and recover and, ultimately, take better care of those that you serve. If one of your colleagues reached out to you and asked if you could hold their umbrella, you wouldn't hesitate because that's what you do. You take care of each other and you take care of your pupils. It's time you start taking care of you.

“When admiring other people's gardens, don't forget to tend to your own flowers.”

— **Sanober Khan**

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